**Kateryna BABKINA**

**Writing the Not-Self**

“If I were you,” my grandfather used to say, “I would not be in your place now.” This admonishment referred mostly to the situations when something was lost or broken or done wrong and someone – more specifically, me – and I was about to be punished. Generally, my grandfather’s statement describes pretty well the situation when someone is trying to be in the place of someone else.

This approach is not even about being judgmental, blaming or depreciating, which is obviously not acceptable. It is just about trying to solve something from the position of somebody else. Somehow, when we put ourselves in the place of somebody else, we immediately decide that this other person has done something wrong that actually led to some situation we can consider as a problem. This kind of “presumption of guilt” makes us think how we would act, if we were in the place of the other, so that we would not end up in the same problematic place.

Michel Foucault said our knowing of the Other is rather the creation and maintenance of imaginary representations. However, the real living, flesh-and-blood “Other,” a person or group of people with their lives, ideas, pains and challenges, might feel depreciated by the fact that someone is trying to simulate their lives, trying to turn them into some imaginary substance. Those claims of knowing the Other, when in fact we are only imagining them, can be really harmful.

After considering this, if you ask me, “Can the writer speak on behalf of not-self?,” I would rather say no. However, there’s some super-thing about being a writer, a particular superpower that every good fiction writer has for sure. It is the unique capacity of *being* someone else. This super-skill of transforming into the not-self follows in the footsteps of Flaubert becoming M-me Bovary and admitting it clearly and aloud. Therefore, writers are the only providers of the possibility to have an emotional experience inside the lives of the others without having that actual life, and without being demanded to deliver any solutions. Writing of this kind can illuminate any specific time and place, situation or personality, challenge or disaster—and thus grow empathy, desire to know, understand, appreciate, love, share and help. Even the things, peoples and worlds, which do not literally exist, can be experienced as real and so known, understood, appreciated, loved, shared and helped.

I’ve myself taken the challenge of being a not-self with every book I write. The last time I took this challenge, as I worked on a children’s book about a boy with blood cancer, it took me more than a year of research and witnessing and sharing with kids, parents, doctors and volunteers. To be brief, what I’ve taken from all those people who I spent that year with was the ability to talk about cancer and death with no pathos and tragedy. The games that bedridden kids invent for themselves, the plans they build for every new day or every new part of the day, the bargain they have with doctors and mothers to have some forbidden fun, whether that fun is a walk outside or ant-sized peace of chocolate, the way they accept death, pain, suffering of their parents, the way they emotionally survive despite the limitations of food and activities, turned out to be way more informative then all of the statistics that kill you with their bleakness, or tear-jerking descriptions. At the end, the story I wrote was not a tragedy—simply precise and, I hope, emphatic.

Everything that a writer creates after honest investigation and research, achieving true empathy and deep understanding, and articulating questions without trying to give any answers is the Real Thing—because in the process of delivering such writing, selves and not-selves disappear, and only human values and good stories remain.

If I were my grandfather, I would probably never make the statement he did. But the truth is, my grandfather had passed away so long ago that even the wrinkled, pale face of the best friend of my childhood has become transparent, almost faded entirely from my memory. I don’t really remember any of his statements. Still, when writing, I dare to be him. Through me, he tells the joke I’ve started this story with, and many other jokes. And wherever he is now, I’m sure he does not mind.